



Odysseus and Adventures, Authenticity and Wisdom

Convocation Remarks
by Head of School Lee Burns '87
Wednesday, August 19, 2026

Good morning and welcome to the 122nd beginning of a school year for the McCallie School. I especially welcome those of you who this year are new to McCallie. I hope you will, very soon, feel not just warmly welcomed, but that you will know and feel that you are a part of a close-knit and caring family—the McCallie family.

1,007 students, along with the faculty and staff, comprise our immediate family. You students hail from 29 states and 22 countries, and you 6th graders are joining us from 39 different elementary schools and home-schooling co-ops last year. Despite this size and wide range of backgrounds, we are one school, one community, one family.

And you are each part of a story that is bigger than you...and that predates you.

18,729 boys and young men have ventured to this school since 1905, each of them full of wonder and promise on their first day of school here on the Ridge. This ridge, though, hasn't always been a school. It was a Civil War battlefield in 1863, when young men fought and strived and sacrificed for values and ideals that would shape this country. We sit upon a sacred spot. This land also was a farm, planted and tended for the feeding and nourishment of others. It also was the home of a family—the McCallie family—led by The Reverend Thomas Hook McCallie and his wife Ellen and their 16 children who lived in a home situated where Founders Dorm sits today just over your shoulders.

That family, at the initiative and urging of two sons, Park and Spencer McCallie, would in 1905 transform their farm, and their home, into a school for boys whose purpose, at its founding, would be for the glory of God in Christ. And on September 21, 1905, 58 boys, both day students from near and boarding students from far, would gather for the first day of classes.

Those 58 boys took a chance on a new school. Some walked to school that morning; others rode a trolley; still others left their hometowns, their parents, and their friends. I'm sure they were all nervous,

some even scared. But they were brave and courageous, drawn to a new adventure: this new McCallie School on Missionary Ridge.

It is through leaning into adventure that we grow the most, that we discover who we are, that we develop into who we are meant to be, that we find purpose, and that we find the most fulfillment.

Like many of you, over the summer I saw the movie *The Odyssey*, based on Homer's classic Greek epic poem. It, too, is a story of adventure, discovery, and purpose. It recounts the 10 year journey of King Odysseus returning home to Ithaca after leading the Greeks to a victory over Troy in a decade-long war. Odysseus' 560 mile sea voyage home with his several hundred men presented them with many obstacles, dangers, resistance, distractions, discouragement, and reasons to turn around or give up.

Odysseus and his men encounter 12 major obstacles on what should have been a week-long sail. They range from a battle with the Cicones to the one-eyed cyclops they blind to escape, from Circe who turns his men to pigs to the sirens who with their songs seduce the sailors toward the deadly rocks, to choosing whether to sail closer to Scylla the six-headed monster or Charybdis the gigantic whirlpool. The journey takes Odysseus to the underworld to confront the consequences of his choices. It brings him to Calypso's island, where he could comfortably live with her forever. Other episodes in the journey force him to wrestle with pride, temptations, and pleasures which can subvert his purpose. Parts of his journey include his need for help from others, while other moments reveal to him the inner strength he possesses.

Awaiting him at home in Ithaca is his faithful and beloved wife, Penelope, and their loyal son, Telemachus, who, with just a small band of friends, believe Odysseus is still alive, as the Ithacans plot and push to declare a new king, before he finally makes his way into his palace disguised as a beggar.

On the surface, *The Odyssey* is a story of one man finding his way home. More than that, though, it is a story of a man becoming a man who can find his way home...who can make his way home. It is the story of the development of Odysseus...and his discovery of who he is. It is as much about Odysseus' internal journey as it is his journey on the sea.

While there are many dangerous and daring moments he faced that are quite dramatic on a 3-D Imax screen, I want to reflect with you for several minutes about one of the challenges featured more fully in the book than the movie.

Early in their voyage home, a storm blows the ships off course, and they reach an unknown shore they explore. Odysseus and his men encounter inhabitants who eat lotus plants. They introduce his men to this sweet tasting plant. The men find the plant not just to be delicious, but its pleasure is powerful, alluring, and addictive. Once they eat it, they lose their desire to return home. They forget about their home, their families, their journey. They just want the pleasure of the plant. They want to remain with the Lotus Eaters.



For ten years, they had struggled in a mighty war. They had begun a grueling trek across the sea. They were surely exhausted. And someone offers them comfort and ease rather than struggle. Comfort over discomfort. “You don’t have to struggle anymore.”

Many of the obstacles that Odysseus and his men faced were violent and powerful adversaries: monsters, storms, battles, bloodshed. Here, instead, there was no obvious villain. Just pleasure. A plant offered by new friends. Plants and new friends are good of course.

The Lotus Eaters provide pleasure without purpose. Pleasures can cause us to forget where we are going, what our purpose is, who we are.

What is your lotus?

Is it scrolling TikTok or Instagram for another hour?
Is it caring too much about your grades or games or a girl?
Is it playing too many video games for too long?
Is it eating another dessert?
Is it living for likes, followers, and approval?
Is it choosing entertainment over meaningful relationships?
Is it retreating or resting too much to avoid conflict and difficulties?
Is it filling all your quiet moments with noise?

None of these are inherently evil or even bad things. The danger is when something that is pleasurable steals your motivation to do something more difficult and more meaningful. The greatest danger you may face this year may not be something that could hurt you but something that makes you so comfortable, or so distracted, that you forget where you are going.

Don’t be a Lotus-Eater.

Odysseus sees what is happening to his men. He drags them back to the ships and ties them down so they will focus on their journey home.

To get to the place that is best for you—your Ithaca—to be your best as a young man, what good distractions do you need to jettison? What struggles and discomforts do you need to embrace instead? What adventures do you need to lean into? Who will you trust to drag you away from pleasures that undermine your purpose?

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In your years at McCallie, I hope you will begin to reflect upon and wrestle with what your purpose is. Why are you alive? Why are you really at McCallie? What are you supposed to do? Your purpose, I propose, is more than being successful, though I certainly want you to make good grades, win games, stage terrific musicals and plays, and earn great distinctions in your academic and other endeavours. Those things frequently happen here, and that is a good thing.

I contend that your purpose is far more than being happy, though I certainly want you to enjoy McCallie, develop close friendships, laugh heartily and often, be playful, and have a good overall sense of emotional and mental well-being. We are fortunate to have a school community that is overwhelmingly positive, healthy, and happy.

But your purpose is more than success and happiness, as good and important as those are. Purpose, though, can be more elusive and take time and effort to contemplate...and, eventually, to discover. As with Odysseus, it is often found through struggle and discomfort, through difficult lessons learned, through a long and arduous journey—both an external journey, yes, but an internal journey as well.

At McCallie, we will push and challenge and stretch you. We will see that you struggle and that you are uncomfortable at times. We will expect your best. We will tell you when you fall short. We will correct you. You need that. But we will do that in the context of caring and supporting and loving you, giving you a safe place to take chances, be adventurous, explore new ideas and passions, make mistakes, fail, fall down, and rise back up. We don't want or expect perfection, but we do expect persistence and grit and guts.

And we also expect your presence. Relationships are the fuel upon which McCallie runs, and presence is the prerequisite for relationships. We are present for each other when we show up for each other, listen carefully, look each other in the eyes, respond with kindness, and serve and help each other. That's why we enjoy such a powerful spirit of brotherhood at McCallie. We are present for each other, not distant and distracted.



Your presence, though, is beneficial not just for your classmates and our school, but it is a pathway to discovering your purpose. Be present with yourself. In your years at McCallie, you will have many occasions to hear and be in conversations about life's big questions. Who am I as a person? Who is God? How do I view the world? What is true? Do I have duties to anyone beyond myself? What is my purpose?

Those aren't questions with simple and quick answers, like getting a prepackaged burrito in the Taco Bell drivethrough. Rather, they require time and space, free from distraction. In the midst of all the busyness at McCallie, and in the midst of your many other commitments, I encourage you to put away your devices and other distractions—even good distractions—and touch grass and get quiet on the creek.

An authentic you will be better equipped to answer life's big questions. And to have wise and honorable answers to those questions. This year, we will be talking a lot about honor and wisdom.

Grass and creeks invite us to slow down, to open our hearts and minds, to reflect. In the quietness and stillness, you are more likely to start to discover—and develop—the emerging you, the real you, the authentic you.

We live in an increasingly artificial world—artificial sweeteners, artificial food and personas, and of course artificial intelligence. We will be talking a lot about AI this year, including many positive aspects to it. But we will also warn you of its downside and dangers. At McCallie, we prioritize authentic over artificial.

While artificial intelligence may be fast and efficient, human development of the kind we most care about at McCallie is usually not best served by speed and efficiency. We want you to develop your own ideas, your own voice, your own identity. We want you to think for yourself, reason for yourself, and write for yourself. We want you to examine lots of ideas and see how they connect (or not). We want you to develop strong cognitive muscles and the ability to sustain attention and concentration. All of this is a circuitous journey, full of challenges and course corrections, and takes significant time. AI is often a shortsighted shortcut that short circuits learning...and who you are becoming. It's a self-cheat in many cases...cheap fast food with little nutritional value.

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One of our greatest traditions is the honor code, which was established at McCallie in 1906—120 years ago. We are a school where you can leave out a laptop or lacrosse stick and expect it to be there when you return. A teacher can leave a room during a test. We believe what we tell each other. Trust is essential in a strong, close knit community.

Honor, though, isn't automatic. Never before has it been so easy to cheat in our society and schools. Stealing now is possible not only with physical items, but it is with on-line identities and digital products. Lying is so prevalent in our society that many people think it's no big deal.

Honor at McCallie, though, remains a very big deal. As important as it is, we recognize that honor isn't something a person is born with. Honor must be taught and developed. It must be practiced and reinforced. There must be accountability and correction. The Senate, seated behind me, is a visible reminder of how essential honor is to the McCallie School. It is up to them, and to all of us, to protect and promote the honor code. Throughout our history, honor has been more owned by the students rather than imposed by the adults. The honor code is yours.

I want each of you to become men of honor. I also want you to become men of wisdom. Wisdom is more than being smart or making A's. There are many very smart people who make a mess of their lives. It is more than general intelligence. There are many people who know a lot but still fail at life, whose lives are filled with far more folly than flourishing. It is more than being an ethical person who makes moral decisions. Having good principles does not guarantee making good decisions.



I believe that the greatest source of wisdom is from the Bible's Old Testament book of Proverbs, written mostly by King Solomon in large measure as a curriculum offered by adult mentors for teenage boys. Life is complex and full of competing choices, most of which are good. What class or activity should I pick? Whom should I seek as my closest friends? Is now or later the right time to confront a friend about bad choices he is making, and what is the best way to do that? Should I specialize in one sport or play multiple ones? Should I pursue or break off a romantic relationship? Should I focus more on the SAT or the ACT? What college should I attend? Choosing carefully among good options is challenging, requiring wisdom.

Wisdom has been described as being competent in the complex realities of life. More particularly, it is the ability to see life as God sees it and to live in harmony with His designs.

Proverbs presents a pathway for becoming a wise person who will be more likely to make wise decisions. The book begins by stating that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The word fear in this context means awe, reverence, trust, and obedience to God rather than being terrified or afraid. It encourages us to see a bigger picture and purpose for our lives. Throughout the 31 chapters, the book covers a number of practical topics: choosing friends carefully, speaking truthfully, working diligently, listening to correction, avoiding pride, caring for the poor, faithfulness in relationships, and seeking justice, among other topics. The book tells us that a wise person will be marked by righteousness, peace, and stability. The Bible also tells us that Jesus is the personification of wisdom and thus worthy of studying, following, and trusting.

This coming year, you will each face your challenges and obstacles, perhaps even monsters. They won't be the six-headed creatures or Cyclopes that Odysseus encountered. They'll look more ordinary: distraction, pride, comfort, temptation, impatience, technology, the desire to fit in, and the temptation to take the easy way out. You'll need wisdom to fight and vanquish them.

Wisdom is knowing how to live. Wisdom is knowing what matters. Wisdom is knowing when to speak and when to be quiet. When to work and when to rest. When to compete and when to encourage. When to shoot and when to pass. When to use technology and when to turn it off. When to follow the crowd and when to stand alone. Wisdom is knowing that not everything you can do is something you *should* do.

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And Proverbs repeatedly tells us that wisdom has to be pursued. You don't accidentally become wise. You develop wisdom through listening, experience, humility, discipline, failure, reflection, prayer, and the counsel of people who are wiser than you.

Developing wisdom is one of the great opportunities you have at McCallie. You will encounter challenges that will stretch and push you. You will embark on adventures that will test you. You will find wise mentors who will guide you. You will hear and even study the Scriptures. You will be encouraged to reflect on big questions, to discover and develop who you are.



You will be challenged to contemplate your purpose.

Shortly after founding our school, brothers Park and Spencer McCallie answered that big question about what our purpose in life is. In answering that question, they established our motto: Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Glorify God. Enjoy God.

We glorify God when we learn about God, about who He is and what He values, as revealed in the Old and New Testaments and in the life and teachings of His Son, Jesus. We glorify God when we praise Him in prayer and worship, when we align our lives with His good commands for us, including loving and serving others and forgiving each other and treating everyone with dignity as fellow image bearers of God.

Glorifying and enjoying God is a foundation for a transformed life, for using the challenges and obstacles we encounter as ways to become men of honor, truth, and duty...as ways to become wise men...as ways to discover your purpose and path on your great journey and adventure through life.

We enjoy God when we experience and internalize the amazing and unconditional love He has for us, especially through His Son Jesus, when we love others generously, when we are freed from the worries and guilt that can rob our joy, when we study and celebrate the beauty of the world, when we lean into adventures, when we replace our fears with trust in God, freeing us to live with boldness, peace, and joy, no matter the circumstances.

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The year ahead of you is part of that journey and adventure, just as it has been for generations of McCallie boys before you. This school is your Ithaca, your home. And we are your family, here to support your external journey...and here to support your internal journey as you grow toward the man God intends you to be. No matter your background, no matter your story, you are here, in this very place and in this very moment, for a good and important reason, orchestrated and ordained by a loving God. And you and we are ready for this year.

May God guide our steps, may He bless and protect each of us, and may He bless and protect this our school, this our family, as we undertake a noble journey on this sacred and historical site on the side and slopes of Missionary Ridge.

It is my honor to declare the start of the 122nd school year at The McCallie School.

On McCallie and onward McCallie.

